

How to Keep Your Research Project on Track

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Insights from When Things Go Wrong

Edited by

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7. Coming up with a research question: opinions, feedback and networking

Deisi Yunga

At the beginning of my doctoral programme, I had very ambitious plans for my thesis. My goal was to come up with an all-encompassing research question that, after being answered, would solve one, if not more of the problems within my research field. It was a little naive, to be sure.

The first months of my programme were, to say the least, full of concern and self-inflicted stress. I wanted to absorb every piece of information available in my research field. This approach got me lost in the literature and I did not know which path to follow. It seemed that in each article I read, there was a new piece of information or idea that could enrich my research question—Eureka!—or at least, I thought so every time I would finish reading a paper. In the end, I realised that although these ideas were often good on their own, they would eventually lead me in different directions.

Some months later, when I thought I had my ideas clear, I nervously presented my initial research question to some of my colleagues. I received mostly very valuable feedback. However, the most frequent advice was ‘it’s too big, narrow it down’ and each of my colleagues gave me ideas on how to do this and what literature to read. However, each colleague recommended very diverse literature that started with Plato and ended with last month’s publication of the most popular indexed journals in my field – only 2400 years’ worth of material to review! I was going to get lost – yet again!

I wasn’t expecting this: why? Well, at the time I thought that because my colleagues belonged to the same specific subfield, they would naturally recommend to me the same, or at least similar, literature. I would just have to read it to clarify and narrow my research question down.

My initial naivety became panic. At this point, I was pretty aware of my limits. I knew that trying to integrate dozens of different articles and my colleagues’ opinions was, without doubt, impossible and I would inevitably broaden my research question again.

So my first learning was: just don’t do it . . .

Every time somebody gave me advice about my research, she or he did

so (probably with the best intentions) from the narrow perspective of her or his own specific research and experience. However, rather than getting completely lost in the initial excitement of a new paper or book that appears relevant, I now evaluate the methodology, findings and theories deeply before deciding whether or not to make them part of my research.

I've also learned to scan literature people recommend. To my surprise, I can make an unexpectedly fast selection of the papers that truly interest me and appear relevant and discard the ones that don't. I am finally on track and defining the characteristics of my own research study.

This experience of massive feedback also heightened my awareness of the world outside my supervisory team, a world full of experts, some of whom could help me. I decided to be more proactive, contacting researchers in conferences and through email. The worst they could tell me was 'I have no time for you', assuming that they would answer me at all.

When looking for experts in my field and seeking advice, I didn't find the 'bow tie-wearing martinets' I always pictured the H-index 20+ university professors would be. Instead, I found a dynamic network of knowledgeable people who have advised me, not just about my research question but also about methodological design, possible outcomes, and what to do if things go wrong. Of course, not all answers have been positive. Sometimes, I've been told to contact them later upon reaching a more advanced stage in my research and others simply have not replied. Yet, at the end of the day, I gained much more than I expected.

Not surprisingly my second learning and advice is: *do not* be afraid of contacting seemingly unreachable experts in the field. I write emails, join research networks, approach people in conferences, and so on. I've expanded my network and hopefully begun to enrich my research and my future work. Realistically you never know if the person who answers you will become your greatest advisor, next collaborator, best friend – or all of the above.

In retrospect, I'm glad of my initial naivety because it made me discover what was out there. My panic made me aware of my own abilities as a researcher and the need to develop. I'm thankful for the network in my field whose collective experiences and opinions have helped me begin to develop my own experience, shape my research question, and start to find my own angle on one aspect of one of my initial research questions.

